

## 2013 Letters About Literature Level 3 Honorable Mention

Clarissa Raineear's letter to Kathleen Grissom, author of *The Kitchen House*

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January 9, 2013

Dear Kathleen Grissom,

For seven years, the facts of slavery have been drilled into my memory. I can tell you exactly what was exchanged in the Triangular Trade. I can explain the process of buying and selling slaves. I can describe the basics of the lives of slaves and their masters. Yet these are merely part of a lesson plan, notes meant to be learned and memorized for an upcoming test. We were taught to assume an air of detachment on the subject, to think of slaves in an "aren't we glad we don't do that anymore" manner. Though we felt sadness for their suffering, our minds were always focused on the next quiz, the next vocabulary set to study. Not once did we examine specific lives of slaves as if we were looking through their eyes. *The Kitchen House* seamlessly paired the history I had known with the raw emotion I had never experienced, and I will forever be changed because of it.

As the novel progressed, I was struck by the reality of Lavinia's life. Her virtual enslavement to Marshall infuriated me, not just for Lavinia's sake, but for the countless other women who had married and agonized, believing it to be their best and only option. Caught up in the lessons of indifferent teachers, I never fully grasped the concept that these events in history affect real people. I was filled with disgust that I had not viewed actual humans, many of whom led lives worse than the characters in *The Kitchen House*, any further than words on a PowerPoint presentation. To how many questions had I responded blindly, choosing the correct answer without any feeling any emotion for the people who were enslaved, the people who experienced lifetimes of discrimination because they were female or African?

The end of your novel fully opened my eyes to this ignorance. I was gripped by sadness not only for Mae and Belle, but for all the characters. Jimmy's death. Ida's continued rape. Jamie's

loss of his mother. Miss Martha's descent into insanity. I found myself sobbing for the people throughout history who struggled because of their race or gender. I had thought I understood all there was to know about slavery and women's rights, but it was through your novel that I realized the entirety of this period in time will never be grasped. No human could fully comprehend being trapped in a life of suffering unless she has experienced it herself. It was at this moment that I knew we had been taught history in an ineffectual manner.

Humanity has been filled with suffering, and we are intended to learn of our mistakes so that we do not repeat them. At some point, however, these ideals became so muddled in the face of testing and performance. No student could forever remember humankind's worst errors by studying a timeline recorded in class. The emotion of our experiences is our greatest asset in memory. Because of *The Kitchen House*, the brief in-class lessons about slavery and women's rights have taken on a deeper meaning for me. I learn the information not to pass the final exam, but to prevent these events from occurring again. It is with sadness that I now recall the lives of slaves and women such as Lavinia, and it is with new determination that I seek to learn as much as possible about discrimination so that I may aid in removing it from our society. It is because of *The Kitchen House* that I can experience true, deep sadness for a history that otherwise would have been nothing but a chapter in a textbook, forgotten within a year.

Sincerely,

Clarissa Raineer